

Easter 2010 The Best News We Almost Missed

Luke 24:1-12

I went to seminary during an era when there were still debates about the role of women in church leadership. My seminary represented a pretty unique mix back then of being relatively conservative in theology, but progressive in practice. Sometimes that meant that there were a lot of male students who didn't think that the women belonged there. It also meant that a lot of the women who did come to seminary had to struggle for acceptance either from their churches or their fellow students. The president of the seminary used to say that everyone who came to Fuller came over someone else's objections. That was certainly true for most of the women I knew.

But it led to a peculiar kind of inequality back then. Guys could decide to go to seminary and no one would bat an eye. If they said they wanted to go, their churches would usually send them. But in a lot of traditions, when a woman said she wanted to go to seminary and into ministry, she had to prove herself in some significant way to her church and to everyone else.

Here's the interesting inequality that led to. I knew a lot of guys in seminary who were destined to be average or below average ministers. Some of them didn't belong there at all. But the women I knew during those years were some of the most intelligent, dynamic, effective leaders I've ever seen. When I taught preaching at Fuller, the women students regularly did better than the guys—they'd overcome too much not to do their very best work.

I'm not bringing this up today to make our Easter celebration a case for women in church leadership. That's a case in my view that has already been won.

I say all this just to point out what a central role women played in the report of Christ's resurrection. Whatever else may have happened to our understanding of women leaders in the church's history, our most important story—the single best piece of news in the entire Good News—the account of Christ's resurrection from the dead and his transformation into a new being—all of that begins with a handful of women who found the empty tomb and spread the word to the rest.

What if those guys hadn't listened? What if they hadn't believed the report that Mary and the others brought back with them? What if these 1st-century men had

simply ignored the women when they came to say that Jesus had kept his promise and defeated the power of death forever.

We might have missed the whole thing.

Who knows what might have happened had the Romans found the empty tomb and closed it back up again. They might have put another body in there—they were pretty good at killing people back then—there wouldn't have been much of a problem finding a spare body laying around.

What if the Pharisees or the High Priests of Judaism had found that Jesus had been raised and tried to cover it up? In Matthew's gospel they tried to bribe the Romans guards to keep the story quiet.

We might have missed the whole thing, but we didn't. The four gospels each tell the story in slightly different ways, but the one detail that is consistent in each book—besides the fact of the resurrection itself—is that the first people to figure it out were the women among the followers of Jesus.

As we celebrate Easter today, have a good thought for the women in the story. Their culture didn't offer them much in the way of freedom or opportunity or even value, but in our Christian story they play a crucial role. We should never, ever forget that.

Now to the Easter story as we find it in Luke's gospel. Don't miss it—listen for what God is going to teach you today.

1On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 2They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 5In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 7The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again." 8Then they remembered his words.

9When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. 11But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 12Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

It's impossible for us to imagine the devastation felt by the disciples and the other followers of Jesus. This group of average men and women had given up jobs and homes to follow the one they believed to be the Messiah. They'd been threatened, rejected and dismissed, and now this Jesus character had gotten himself killed. So they're sitting around feeling sorry for themselves, and some of the women in the group go to prepare the body of Jesus for permanent burial. You know the rest. He wasn't there, and so they ran back to tell the others—they were the first evangelists of the resurrection.

One of my favorite lines is spoken by one of the angels who the women find in the tomb. 'Why do you look for the living among the dead?'

My other favorite comes when Luke describes how the men reacted.

'They didn't believe the women,' Luke tells us, 'because their words seemed like nonsense.'

This is one of those days in the church year when we set aside what we think about how the world works and celebrate a pure miracle. We celebrate that miracle even when the details of it might seem impossible—it might even seem like nonsense to us.

But our struggle to understand it doesn't change what happened in the gospel story. Jesus came, he loved and he served, he suffered and he died. He was dead and buried, in the tomb for three days. And then suddenly he was alive again—not the same, exactly. But fully alive and calling us all to follow him as his disciples.

We talk a lot about the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, and that's a good thing. But it's easy sometimes to miss just how important—literally, how crucial—the

resurrection is for our faith and hope. In the Cross we're forgiven for whatever we've done or thought or believed that has kept us from the relationship with God we were meant to have.

But in the resurrection we're promised a new life in the future—not just forgiveness for our past. Daniel Kirk, a young New Testament professor in California, has an article this week in Christianity Today. He writes this:

'Resurrection and new creation are inseparable. The future for which we long and hope is the moment when God recreates this world and populates it with renewed, embodied people. Resurrection tells us that a new creation is coming. The resurrection of Jesus tells us that this new creation has already begun.'

Maybe the question we can all ask ourselves is this: What is it that we think Easter means?

I asked that question on Facebook last week and got some great answers:

A member from our last church said that Easter is 'The completion of God's plan of redemption.'

Elizabeth Woodworth, who used to be a member here, wrote: Easter is 'the ultimate assurance that things are going to be OK.'

One of my closest friends from home just wrote: 'Do-over.'

My cousin Mary Francis added: 'His resurrection is the hope that lives in me. Just as Jesus overcame death, so shall I.'

What do we think Easter means?

George Barna compiles polling data on religious issues in the States. He was relieved, I suppose, to find that 67% of Americans knew that Easter was a religious holiday.

More troubling, though, was the finding that only 42% of Americans who responded linked Easter to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

A full 2%--that's 6 ½ million Americans, folks—said that Easter celebrated the birth of Christ. Seriously. That one may come back again this Christmas.

1% of those who responded said that Easter was a celebration of the second coming of Christ. Not exactly.

What do we think Easter means?

It's important for us to link the Cross and the empty tomb to the way God forgives our sins and makes us into the people he meant for us to be all along. The Cross makes us clean, but it's the resurrection that gives us hope that God can finish what he started.

We talk about sin sometimes as the breaking of rules, when the analogy that explains it best is anything that threatens our lives—whatever threatens to keep us from living the way we were meant to live.

Last month a 7-year-old boy named Carlos got a hero's welcome when he visited the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. The week before he was hiding in a locked bathroom while his parents were being robbed. He called 911—the American version of 999—and he said:

'Some guy is being mean to my mom and dad. Bring cops, a lot of them. Bring soldiers, too. Come really fast.'

When the robbers heard the police coming they left without hurting anyone, and so little Carlos was honored for his courage.

That phone call Carlos made was a lot like a prayer. That prayer is familiar to anyone who has struggled with some sin or behavior in our lives. Carlos is an example of how we all come before God with the things that threaten us. 'I'm afraid...send cops, send soldiers...send someone!'

We run and hide and we cry out for a savior, and we find that God's already sent one, Jesus the Messiah.

What is it that we think Easter means?

If the sacrifice of the cross saves us from the sin that leads to death, then the resurrection calls us to a new way of life.

We see all through the New Testament that through faith we're called to abandon old ways and live by the values of God's Kingdom. It's as if when we come to faith, Christ looks us in the eye and says:

'Why do you keep looking for life among the dead?'

Our lives are supposed to mean something more than just what we have, or what we spend, or even what we give away. Our lives are supposed to mean something more than that. We were created to live in what the Old Testament calls Shalom.

We've talked about this before. Shalom has a broad range of meanings. It can refer to the communal well-being of the nation, or physical health. A sense of contentedness or happiness in relationships. It often describes a state of completion and wholeness. One writer called it 'the webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.'

That 'justice, fulfillment and delight' has another meaning in the New Testament. It represents the love we experience from God, and the love we're made to share with each other and with the earth.

Simon Barnes is a writer for the Times here in London. A few weeks ago he wrote a piece about his second son Eddie, who has Down's Syndrome. After telling some stories about how Eddie faces the world and how the world responds to him, Barnes writes:

'Eddie's function is to be loved, and to love in return. Perhaps that is everyone's real function.'

Maybe that's a part of the Easter message that we forget too often.

Maybe the most important thing for us to remember—to wrestle with this Easter is this: All of this happened because God loves us so much. John 3:16, maybe the

best known passage of Scripture in the entire Bible, reminds us that

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him, even if that person dies, that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.’

What we celebrate at Easter isn’t just Christ’s death for us—that’s only half of the gift of Holy Week.

What we celebrate is the way God demonstrates that death isn’t the end. That the promise to us is that somehow we will spend eternity in the presence of the one who made us and redeemed us and loves us still.

In Christ’s death, love itself was crucified. But in the resurrection that love rose again and returned stronger and more powerful than ever. He offers each one of us the chance to love and be loved in the way we were meant to be from the beginning of time.

This Easter—on this resurrection Sunday—take a moment to reflect on the gift we’ve been given in Jesus Christ. This isn’t nonsense—it’s a great big cosmic do-over. Don’t miss it.

Spend some time today, this week, thanking God for the ways he loves us and comes after us. For the way he died for us, but even more for the way he rose again and welcomes us into new life.

Amen, and Happy Easter.